

**Abstract**

In order to develop Teacher quality The NSW Department of Education and Training and the New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group developed the Enhanced Teacher Training Program (ETTP) the purpose of the ETTP was to enhance selected non-Aboriginal teachers knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal history and cultures, and to develop their cross-cultural communication skills. With more informed cross cultural understandings it was expected that the participants would develop appropriate classroom management and pedagogical strategies for working in schools with high Aboriginal student populations.

The aim of this study was to investigate the experiences of the seven non-Aboriginal preservice teachers undertaking the year-long program. A qualitative research methodology was applied to this study to investigate the prospective teachers' cross cultural experiences, the methods utilised to gather the data included focus groups, participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, email communication and document analysis.

The findings revealed that research, theory and practice are inextricably intertwined and non-Aboriginal teachers' cross-cultural learning was enriched through experiential learning opportunities throughout diverse setting within the Illawarra Aboriginal community. Furthermore partnerships between universities, the NSW DET and highly-committed individuals were critical to ensuring Aboriginal Education policy translates effectively into practice.

**Key Words**

Teacher Education, Preservice, Aboriginal Education, Cross-cultural immersion, mentoring, Aboriginal Education Policy,

**Research Background**

The NSW Department of Education and Training Human Resource Directorate, Strategic Planning and Workforce Capability Unit, invited representatives from the education faculties from NSW and Australian Capital Territory (ACT) universities to submit a proposal for the development and delivery of an Enhanced Teacher Training Program (ETTP) that would better prepare prospective non-Aboriginal teachers for an initial appointment to schools with significant Aboriginal student enrolments (Long, Cavanagh, & Labone, 2009).

Four universities submitted proposals and the Australian Catholic University (ACU) were accepted as the successful tenderer. However, at the time, the ACU did not attract enough preservice teachers to fill all of the twenty positions available in the program at its NSW campus. It was therefore decided that the remaining scholarships should be allocated to other interested universities, including Charles Sturt University, the University of Western Sydney and the University of Wollongong. The development of the ETTP across a multi-campus approach led to a greater degree of collaboration

between all four participating universities along with a diverse group of prospective teachers (Long, Cavanagh, & Labone, 2009).

The ETTP commenced at the University of Wollongong in 2007 with twenty students selected by the NSW DET & AECG each of the universities varied in the delivery of the ETTP. However the following conditions remained consistent across the four campuses: the DET agreed to pay the preservice teachers' Higher Education Contribution associated with two enhanced training units in Aboriginal education; a training allowance would be paid to assist preservice teachers with cross-cultural community engagement and professional internships in schools with significant Aboriginal student enrolments; and the preservice teachers were guaranteed permanent employment with the DET at the completion of the ETTP (Teach Our Mob, NSW Scholarship to Make a Difference Where it Really Counts Information Package, 2008).

The ETTP at UOW was situated within a one-year add-on to the three-year Bachelor of Primary Teaching degree and included 2 units in Aboriginal Education, cross-cultural immersion experiences within the Illawarra Aboriginal community and government agencies, a six week internship at a school with significant Aboriginal populations and one on one mentoring with prominent Aboriginal community members (Teach Our Mob, NSW Scholarship to Make a Difference Where it Really Counts Information Package, 2008).

This study was carried out from February 2008 to January 2009 in the Illawarra (Dharawal Country), just an hour's drive south of Sydney. There are around 5,268 Aboriginal residents in the Illawarra area this represents 1.7% of the total population which is less than the NSW average of 2.1%. However some areas of the Illawarra have higher rates than the NSW average. For example the Aboriginal population in Shellharbour is 2.3% of the total population. Aboriginal people in the Illawarra place high value on country, family connections and kin relationships which encompasses mutual responsibility and sharing of resources. Traditional owners have extensive knowledge and attachment to 'country' and the authority of elders underpins the cultural value system.

Unlike mainstream Australia, Aboriginal young people make up the majority of the population; in 2006 approximately 39% of the Illawarra Aboriginal population in the Greater Wollongong area was aged less than 18 years. Access to early childhood services continues to be an issue. In 2006 21% of Aboriginal residents aged 15 + completed Year 12 compared to 37% non-Aboriginal residents. Aboriginal people in the Illawarra region continue to experience higher rates of unemployment and are also less likely to be engaged in the formal workforce than the non-Aboriginal population (ABS 2001).

The ETTP included fieldwork guided by local mentors to facilitate interactions within the Illawarra Aboriginal community the mentor program consisted of weekly meetings at the UOW Woolyungah Indigenous Centre, along with a combination of face-to-face and on-line support. It was hoped that through the cross-cultural mentoring and immersion experience participants would further their insight into modern-day life and values of local Aboriginal families.

The purpose of this research was to explore, from a non-Aboriginal teacher's point of view, their experiences and insights while undertaking the ETTP. The research questions posed for this study were:

1. What knowledge, values and attitudes do non-Aboriginal preservice teachers bring to the ETTP?
2. What learning experiences do non-Aboriginal preservice teachers identify as most significant within their participation in the ETTP?
3. What challenges do non-Aboriginal preservice teachers identify in the ETTP?

The purpose of question one was to gain insight into the preservice teachers' motivations for undertaking the ETTP and what they hoped to achieve. The Data collection methods included: Focus groups, Semi-structured interviews and informal Conversations. Through thematic analysis some of the key themes that emerged were:

- Gaps in Knowledge and Limited Confidence
- Motivation and Commitment: I genuinely want to make a difference
- Deficit discourses

The participants in this study came to the ETTP with limited cross-cultural knowledge, skills and experiences with the majority acknowledging that their own schooling and teacher education curriculum was derived primarily from dominant western epistemologies. Participants revealed that the lack of Aboriginal education within their education programs meant that the ETTP presented a significant personal and professional development opportunity.

While the findings found that there were gaps in the participants knowledge and experience for working cross culturally, participants' demonstrated that they were highly motivated and personally committed to working towards socially just education practices with Aboriginal students.

*I feel anxious going into unknown environments and not sure whether I will be accepted as a non-Aboriginal person; you really just got to try and be open and confident even though inside you're just screaming out to be accepted*

(Teacher 1).

*I am unsure of even where to start with the cross-cultural immersion activities. I don't want to feel like I'm intruding and taking something for nothing from Aboriginal people, they have been studied enough over the years. I want to come across as genuine and wanting to learn*  
(Teacher 2).

*... haven't known too many Aboriginal people before and feels like you should take individuals as they come, just like you would a non-Aboriginal person* (Teacher 3).

The participants demonstrated a level of pre-cultural competence where individuals accept diversity and inequity and recognise the need for systematic change, but lack the skills and knowledge to make a genuine difference and address inequity (Perso 2012). The findings confirm that even when non-Aboriginal preservice teachers want to make a difference, they need pre-service training to facilitate their cross cultural skills and knowledge.

Deficit Discourses are entrenched historically within policies and legislation and serves to position Aboriginal people negatively for example the current discourse of Closing the Gap on Aboriginal Disadvantage has become ingrained indicating that non-Aboriginal lifestyles and achievement is the desired norm and standards against which all groups will be measured (Sarra 2005).

Dr Chris Sarra research confirms that racist and discriminatory attitudes and beliefs are deeply embedded within the mainstream population. In his study which involved more than 200 people, at which he asked participants to offer adjectives or words to articulate mainstream Australian perceptions of Aboriginal people the following list of the words included: Alcoholics, Drunks, Boongs, Coons, Niggers, Black Bastards, Gins, Darkies, Got it Good, Well kept by government, Privileged, Welfare dependent, Dole bludgers, Handout Syndrome, Lazy, Won't work Aggressive, Violent, Troublemakers, Disrespectful (Sarra 2005). Unless these perceptions are challenged either through formal or informal settings then such attitudes are acted upon within classroom settings and within wider social determinates where Aboriginal people are placed at the negative spectrum.

The findings detected that the participants were aware of the deficit discourses about Aboriginality at the commencement of the ETTP and how Aboriginality is first and foremost associated with disadvantage;

*social and cultural issues are intertwined and frequently Aboriginality is associated with disadvantage”.*

(Teacher 3).

*“... understandings of social and cultural issues and that seeing the disadvantage will be important to her professional development”*

(Teacher 4).

*“I hope I get placed in a school where there are students with disadvantaged backgrounds ... that’s where I want to be “*

(Teacher 7).

*“... if you have Aboriginal students whose home lives are really bad ... then you can counteract that with bringing in role models who can provide them with a different perspective.”*

(Teacher 6).

While deficit discourses prevailed at the commencement of the ETTP what was critical was that the participant demonstrated an openness and willingness to critically examine their personal biases and the implications they had for teaching and working with Aboriginal students and communities. The participant’s approaches to being self reflective and to acknowledge tensions within their own understandings were an important first step in challenging their cultural stereotypes.

Question two was posed to foreground what participants’ identified as the key learning areas during the year long program. The Data collection methods included: Document Analysis, Email Communication, Focus groups and Informal Conversations, through analysis of the data some of the key themes included:

- Cross-Cultural Mentoring
- Cross-Cultural Immersion
- Internship
- Supportive Networks
- Peer Support

The cross cultural mentoring and immersion components included fieldtrips to Aboriginal organisations and significant sites including the Sandon Point Tent Embassy. The fieldtrips facilitated opportunities for participants to hear first-hand local custodians’ perspectives of country, providing a dual cultural lens that enriched their understanding of Aboriginal heritage and contemporary issues. This exposure enabled participants to explore and interrogate issues of social justice, adding in-depth understandings of the lived realities of Aboriginal families within the Illawarra. Further the Aboriginal people from the Illawarra community became powerful players in shaping and developing prospective

teachers' cross cultural knowledge and experiences. Participants shared the impact of having opportunities to form relationships with their mentors

*... during our weekly mentoring group meeting I was exposed to so much insider information that you could never learn in a lecture theatre or from reading a text, all of which enhances my knowledge as a teacher of Aboriginal students*

(Teacher 1).

*... sitting down with, and listening and sharing stories, with our mentors meant that the transition was easier when building up relationships with local Aboriginal people and services. Also genuine relationships meant you gained more cooperation and support which is critical for our teaching in schools with high Aboriginal populations*

(Teacher 5).

*... I was fortunate enough to meet a very inspirational Aboriginal woman who has agreed to take on the role of being my mentor for the year. We would meet when we could to keep up-to-date with what is happening in the community and plan and discuss immersion experiences. Above everything else she has provided me with a vital link to the community .... She has created many opportunities for me to get involved in the community and has been there to answer my endless amount of questions. Through meeting with her I have gained a better understanding of the significance of transition phases in schooling for Aboriginal students, the challenges of getting parent involvement and politics within Aboriginal communities. Together we have attended events such as the Aboriginal Education Conference, parents' advisory committee and AECG meetings*

(Teacher 4).

As part of the cross cultural immersion programs participants attended the weekly Aboriginal homework centre which provided interaction with Aboriginal students and wider community members.

*... the homework centre experience gave me an appreciation of seeing how important it is for Aboriginal students to have an opportunity to come together and build cultural pride and served as a place for Aboriginal students to learn a version of the Dhurawal language and engage in hip-hop and creative workshops with local Aboriginal artists*

(DA EDUT432).

*... in getting to know the kids I learnt first-hand about their ties to extended family; many explained to me their family backgrounds and I learnt how extensive this is compared to non-Aboriginal family structures*

(DA EDUT432).

*“... What I really learnt from being involved in the cross-cultural immersion experiences was the fact that we share much in common, and this broke down barriers for me ...”*

(Teacher 3).

*: “... I think Aboriginal people’s cultural beliefs and world views gets mixed up with socio-economic disadvantage a lot”*

(Teacher 5).

*building legitimate relationships with parents and community members is an important factor that has underpinned all of my immersion experiences and a vital element in providing students with the best chance at success in school*

(Teacher 1).

*. ... working closely with an established, highly-skilled and organised teacher has exposed me to some excellent practices. I feel that I have benefited greatly from this experience, the good times and the bad, and believe that I still have a great deal to learn during the remainder of the internship*

(Teacher 6).

By taking participants out of their ‘comfort zone’ to experience the lives of Aboriginal people, including kin relatedness and exposure to political viewpoints ensured experiential learning opportunities facilitated authentic cross cultural exchanges.

Participants identified that the six week internship in a school with high Aboriginal populations was critical to their learning. Support from their supervising teachers, and developing their professional practice as beginning teachers, gave them opportunities to observe more experienced practitioners working effectively with Aboriginal students enabling them to make links between cross cultural theory and practice (Craven, Halse, Marsh, Mooney, & Wilson-Miller, 2005).

*the school had six Aboriginal staff ... this group of people have provided and continue to provide on-the-ground information about the issues facing Aboriginal students at school Their perspectives are valuable because they collectively have more current experience than almost any other source that I can access for Aboriginal education*

(Teacher 1).



*The 'wisdom' I have sought from this interview has broadened my knowledge of AEOs ... an AEO's role is so integral to day-to-day classroom activities, sometimes acting as a mediator between the school and parents and communities, ensuring that Indigenous students' educational experiences are supported and nurtured"*

(Teacher 5).

*next year I will begin my teaching career in a primary school with significant Aboriginal enrolments in an area unfamiliar to me. By building up a positive relationship with the school or regional AEOs is a start towards building community connections, and increasing my understanding of the local Aboriginal area*

(Teacher 7).

The role of Aboriginal staff in schools reinforced fundamental insight for participants who have developed a wider resource network critical for working in partnerships and identifying how genuine relationships facilitate effective engagement.

The peer support amongst the participants enabled them to make more significant meaning from their shared experiences. For each focus group meeting, participants catered for their mentors and themselves with adequate food and drink and the meeting room served as a place where the participants could debrief about their week, discussing anything from my dog got impounded to what do you think the lecturer means by this assessment task and how do we include an Aboriginal perspective while making the most of the support from each other and their mentors. The finding reveals that peer support was integral to the enhancement of the program

*"... these girls help keep me organised and on top of all the coursework assignments, immersion, focus groups and internship activities"*

(Teacher 3).

*"... I did not personally know some of the girls last year but now I have made lifelong friends through the ETTP"*

(Teacher 4),

*"... I don't know what I would do without Sally"*

(Teacher 6).

*... Something that has been of great value to me while working and studying in the area of Aboriginal education is the role of reflection with my peers. It helps to talk about issues and*



*problems that arise in the course, share our experiences and learn from those of others ... you can engage in this professional dialogue with like-minded people*  
(Teacher 2).

*... It's good that you really get to know the other preservice teachers in the ETTP; you become a really tight group and help each other through all of the challenges and you trust each other and can see that other people are struggling at times, too*  
(Teacher 7).

Over the year-long program the researcher observed that smaller group learning is a real strength of the ETTP. While participants identified the highlight of the one year program they also faced a variety of demanding experiences and research question 3 was posed to identify what these challenges were and to outline the strategies the participants employed to overcome them. The Data collection methods included: Focus groups, Semi-structured interviews and informal Conversations. Through thematic analysis some key themes that emerged were:

- Feeling Marginalised
- Travelling the Distance and Settling In
- Student Behaviour Management Overwhelming
- Anticipating the Placement

Participants reported that the mainstream student cohort completing the Bachelor of Education, were unaware of the ETTP. This proved to be frustrating for the participants as they were continually expected to justify to their peers why they were doing different assessment task. The following perspectives were shared by the participants during focus group discussions and in one-to-one interviews

*... It's hard because your friends completing the mainstream Bachelor of Ed 4th year dismiss what you are doing as they don't really have an understanding, so you're constantly trying to justify why you're choosing to specialise in Aboriginal Education ... you actually begin to see the attitudes and prejudices that are out there toward Aboriginal people*  
(Teacher 1).

*...since doing the ETTP my perception of Aboriginal people has broadened yet many of my friends and families haven't; they're still stereotype Aboriginal people into one label and I find this personally challenging*  
(Teacher 2).

Another challenging experience reported by the participants was the distance travelled to arrive at their internship school. Initially, participants were asked to send a post card to the subject coordinator upon arriving at the township where they were assigned their six-week internship.

*"... We finally made it to Coonamble ... it was a long drive"*

(Teacher 4).

*"... well I made my way safely; the town is much bigger than I expected. I am a bit homesick already and I am starting to really not like crickets; they are gross and hard to kill"*

(Teacher 2).

*"... well I made the drive to Broken Hill and have survived my first day. I went to my first station. I've never seen so many sheep before"*

(Teacher 3).

*"... all ok here; found the school, and house is fine. Went for a walk in the town yesterday. So many Kookaburras!"*

(Teacher 5).

The journey to unfamiliar locations added to the participant's insight and resilience for moving to a rural or remote NSW community to take up a teaching appointment. While participants reported feelings of isolation and culture shock they demonstrated key skills in analysing the cross-cultural relations in their schools and community,

*"... the Aboriginal community appears shut off from aspects of the school ... they don't appear to like interacting with teaching staff and this has made it difficult in getting to know people. I have tried to be proactive by introducing myself to the school's Aboriginal education officer (AEO), however she is extremely busy. I am hoping I will get to build a relationship with her while we are on the Year 5/6 three-day camp to Canberra"*

(Teacher 6).

Behaviour management was reported as the most challenging task of all with participants disclosing being overwhelmed and under-skilled for dealing appropriately with anti-social behaviour.

*"... sadly, the only thing that seems to work is lollies and this has been challenging for me to implement as philosophically I am against this as a behaviour management tool"* (DA EDUT432).

*the class I am teaching find it difficult to pay attention to explicit instruction for more than five minutes. They do not respond well to verbal lessons or discussion. This would not present a problem if the class were all competent readers, as I would simply provide independent written activities. With the class reading ability ranging between level 5 and level 28, the comprehension and reading skills are not sufficient for all students to be able to complete these written tasks, and it is those with the lower reading levels who do not cope with discussion. At this point, I know that changes need to be made, but am unsure about how to go about this*

(Teacher 3).

*speaking to my supervisor teacher after the class, she explained that she could discipline, but it didn't make a difference so why bother. This defeatist attitude was quite disturbing to me, as I could see students were only acting this way as they were aware that there would be no consequences for their actions. Working in this environment everyday would drive me insane. From this experience I have realised that even though I myself acknowledge behaviour management as an area I could improve in, I am still more capable than some teachers who are far more experienced than me. This has been good for me to realise, as I believe that sometimes I am my own worst critic* (Teacher 5).

The journey to effective teaching takes time and experience through critical reflective practice participants displayed awareness and concerns about the low expectation of Aboriginal students (Craven, Halse, Marsh, Mooney, & Wilson-Miller, 2005). Observation, trial and error were important developmental skills, building the participants capacity for dealing with students social and behavioural needs.

The final challenge identified by the participant's was anticipating the confirmation by The NSW DET Human Resource Department of where they will be permanently placed, they expressed that not knowing was the worst part especially for those who were in committed relationships

*"... my husband works and studies in the Illawarra so [she] selected areas close to that base as we can't afford to lose his job"*

(Teacher 4).

*"... we are hoping I get a placement in Sydney as my fiancé works for Qantas"*

(Teacher 1).

“ ... *I'm just not going to worry about where I get my teaching placement next year as it puts too much pressure on me and on the relationship*”

(Teacher 3).

## Recommendation and Conclusion

Research indicates that education is the key for improved life chances for Aboriginal students (Craven, R, Halse, C, Marsh, HW, Mooney, J & Wilson-Miller, J 2005). The then-Minister for Education and Training in the New South Wales Government Dr Andrew Refshauge, publically recognised the work of teachers as the ‘make or break’ element in improving Aboriginal student outcomes (New South Wales Department of Education and Training 2004). The ETTP was a new education model developed by the Australian Catholic University, the NSW DET and the NSW AECG and draws on policy-making, partnerships between Aboriginal communities, the university sector, education departments and government agencies in working together.

The findings indicated that the smaller group learning contexts were an advantage for participant as they supported each other in meeting the academic and cross-cultural learning expectations of the program. Peer support was characterised by friendship and trust enabling participants to work collegially. The participants identified that moving from theory into practice was a profound learning experience that improved their contextual understanding of Aboriginal students. The opportunities to build meaningful relationships with Aboriginal people were an integral part of the cross-cultural learning process (Buckskin, P, 2012). The study concludes that further research needs to be conducted to identify how graduates adapt their preservice training in schools with high Aboriginal populations and whether their practices facilitate improved student engagement and outcomes.

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